

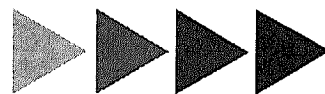
# COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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## **'Field' research in literacy classrooms**

This chapter presents an overview of 'field' approaches to literacy research. Once again we are assuming a situation where a teacher-researcher has identified and clearly described a problem area, an issue, or an area of interest, and formulated one or more related research questions (hypotheses usually are not a part of field approaches to literacy research). S/he is now looking for a research design appropriate to his or her research questions and preferred theories. This chapter looks at the key attributes of field literacy research (definition, designs, tools and methods); case study and action research designs.

### **DEFINING FIELD LITERACY RESEARCH**

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*Field* research is the shorthand term we use to refer to research that relies on data gathered in natural or 'real life' settings as the 'action' happens—for instance, in playgrounds, classrooms, at a work area out on the school verandah, in communities, etc. Much of what is commonly called 'qualitative research' is field research, and data collection methods primarily comprise observations of 'real practices' (eg bedtime story reading) or 'real life' events (eg teacher talk in classrooms compared with adult talk in the home), or recounts of 'real life'

(eg recording oral histories, interviewing people about a practice), or collecting stories.

Field research differs from lab research approaches to investigating literacy in that an important goal of field research is collecting evidence that is *contextualised*. Such data takes into account the kind of school and community in which the research study takes place, the socioeconomic status of the community in which the school is located, the history of the community, and what other things are happening locally, in the state, nation or around the world at the time. On the other hand, field research differs from library research in that it is deeply interested in moment-to-moment interactions among people in a given context (eg a special education classroom, the playground, Parents and Citizens' meetings, the first day of school for Year 1 students, literacy lessons).

### Contextualised enquiry

Field research relies on gathering information about events, processes, programs, issues, activities, and the like *as they occur* within real life contexts or from eye-witnesses. A major reason for the development of this approach is that researchers often want to try and understand the world from the perspectives of other people (a person or a group). Field research provides detailed descriptions (rather than 'counts' or statistical relationships) of specific programs, practices, or people-in-action (eg a teacher, a student, a school policy or curriculum writer). A recent example comes from a study focusing on disadvantage, literacy and technology (Bigum et al 1999) where words are used to evoke the setting and to orient the reader towards what is to follow.

### EXAMPLE

Four Year 9 boys—Stuart, Jarrod, Benjamin and Kyle—have an interesting history in terms of being regularly thrown out of most of the classes they attended each week. Indeed, the label 'troublemakers' seemed to pop up regularly in conversations about these boys with the principal and other teachers at the school. Aside from behavioural 'problems' at least three of the boys were seen by their teachers to have a learning difficulty with English.

Stuart is chatty, friendly and engaging. He has a smallish build for his age. He is given to wearing over-sized, slightly tatty shirts and shorts, occasionally he

would be in school uniform, but even when he was, he managed to look far more casual than other, similarly-attired students. His blonde hair is shoulder-length, and shaved close to his scalp high above his ears. He regards himself as being about Year 6 level in most things at school. He openly declares that he hates writing, and there is general agreement with that from the others. Indeed, on many occasions Ben has actually done Stuart's writing for him at the teacher's request.

At home, he is able to strip down his motorbike and put it back together again in working order. He tells us that he learned to do this by first watching his dad work on Stuart's bike, then from being left to his own devices to figure out a problem or to tune the engine or to rebuild it once his father had taken it apart. When asked what he does when he encounters a problem that he's having trouble with when fixing his bike, he replied without hesitation that 'I read the manual when I get stuck'.

This kind of descriptive (and interpretive) work provides the reader of the report with a mental image of Stuart and signals that there may be some discrepancies found in the data between how Stuart is perceived as a literacy user at school and his actual literacy uses outside school. This kind of data about Stuart tells much more about him than would a table showing his reading age score on a graph or a chi-square statistic of probability for the relationship between his attitude to writing and his performance in class.

*Context* in field approaches to investigating literacy likewise is central. It is conceptualised in much wider terms than the mere physical setting of an event (ie the site). Rather, contexts can be seen as the sum total of meaning-making, social practices, social negotiations, interactions and references to other contexts and events that signal the *sense* that is to be made of a given event or idea etc. Lab research cannot access or produce this kind of data and thus field research approaches often hold more powerful insights into an event or practice (see Richardson 1996).

Susan Tanock's case study of Catie is a good example of this (Tanock 1997). Standardised test results showed that Catie's participation in a pull-out remedial reading program was indeed enhancing her reading scores on tests, but Tanock's observations of Catie in class, her conversations with Catie's classmates, her strategy of having each child identify the three best readers in the class and the three worst readers showed that socially, Catie was seen as 'different' by all of her classmates and was excluded from many of their formal

and informal interactions to the extent that she often felt lonely and was not able to call on her peers for help with in-class reading and writing.

### Interpreting data

The detailed descriptions of field research are often complex, and data analysis is a process of making sense or *meaning* from these descriptions. These meanings can then be used to help explain and help us understand:

- ▼ how something comes to be (eg documenting the first days of school in order to see how this establishes shared understandings of certain literacy concepts and practices, see Putney 1996)
- ▼ the effects of something on something or someone (eg the social status effects of pull-out literacy remediation programs on individual students, see Tanock 1997)
- ▼ one or more literacy practices (eg a comparison of children's literacy practices in school and prior to school or out-of-school, see Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn 1996, Hill et al. 1998, Knobel 1999; the effects of technology on literacy in classrooms, see Bigum and Green 1992, Fitzclarence, Green, and Bigum 1994, Lankshear, Bigum et al. 1997),
- ▼ the social construction of literacy (eg Comber 1996, Gee 1996, Luke 1993)
- ▼ the effects of teacher talk on literacy practices in classrooms (see Baker 1991b, 1992b, Baker and Freebody 1989, Cazden 1988, Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn 1996)
- ▼ the efficacy of a literacy program, curriculum, or policy in a particular setting (eg parts of Anderson, in process, Walton 1993)
- ▼ the effects of location, class, ethnicity, first language and/or gender on literacy performance at school (eg how white, middle-class forms of literacy are valued most in 'mainstream' classrooms; see, Heath 1983, Davies and Munro 1987, Gilbert 1998, Michaels 1986; rural and urban locations affect literacy practices, Breen et al. 1994, Bull and Anstey 1992, and in the transition years, Cairney, Lowe and Sproats 1994; gender and literacy, Davies 1993, Gilbert 1998, Martino 1994)
- ▼ the effects of unequal power distribution in classrooms on literacy learning and practices (eg Lankshear 1997, Luke 1992, Muspratt, Luke and Freebody 1997)

Of course, all descriptive work in a field research report emerges from and reflects the researcher's *interpretations* of 'what went on'; descriptions are always interpreted from some theoretical or ideological stance. For example, an event or transcript of teacher–student interactions can be read (ie interpreted) in any number of ways. Different interpretations can be equally 'valid' and meaningful, depending on the theoretical orientation of the reading and the degree to which they are accepted or rejected by readers of the research report.

The interpretive nature of field approaches to investigating literacy leads many researchers to acknowledge that research *constructs realities*. Research does not simply 'reflect' a reality in the way a mirror does, or as if the Truth about a phenomenon is simply waiting to be discovered. In other words, just as the two very different interpretations of the transcripts earlier were possible—despite it being the *same data*—so too did each interpretation construct a different version of reality; one where the teacher was engaged in a deliberate pedagogical strategy, and one where the teacher was reinforcing the normalising nature of schooling.

### Role of the researcher

The role of the researcher is given explicit attention in field research approaches to literacy investigations because the researcher is acknowledged as having a direct effect on the research design, findings and interpretations of a study—as signalled in the activity in the section above (see also LeCompte and Preissle 1993: 86). This stance is radically different to that of lab approaches to research that insist on research objectivity so that studies are replicable (ie can be repeated by objective others with the same findings) and hence valid.

Often, 'the researcher' is regarded as a data collection *instrument* by many researchers using field approaches to data collection. This is a result of the researcher's values, assumptions, beliefs, and knowledge about a topic directly informing what kinds of data are collected and how they are reported. The people participating in the study (known in field research discourse as 'participants' rather than 'subjects') are also directly involved in constructing the data for the researcher as they interpret what's going on in their interviews and comments.

## Validity

The notion of validity within field research is two-fold. As is the case with lab research, validity is a criteria of effective investigations and is based on the claim that the findings of the study are 'true' and 'warranted' in the sense that they are supported by sufficient evidence (see Yin 1994, Merriam 1997, Mertens 1998). This position on validity was the goal of 'social sciences' in the 1970s, as researchers—and education researchers in particular—worked hard to have field research recognised by the scientific community as equally rigorous and 'scientific' as lab research.

However, critics of a scientific approach to validity reject the assumption that there is a direct correspondence between research findings and a single reality that exists independently of people. Instead, they work from the position that research *constructs* reality and that there are multiple ways of doing so. From this perspective, the main goal of field research—to study people and events etc in their real-life contexts—automatically excludes considerations of such things as 'external validity' or 'reliability' due to the 'one-off' nature of these studies.

Instead, from this perspective, 'good' research focuses on *verifying* the findings of a given study in terms of their credibility and plausibility, rather than trying to apply lab research concepts and practices to field research assumptions and research practices. Much of this verification relies on the soundness of the *arguments* developed in the research report. In terms of a focus on verification rather than internal and external validity, it is also important to ensure that one's account of field research findings is 'believable' and that it contributes in some way to furthering one's own—and hopefully others'—knowledge and understanding.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF FIELD RESEARCH DESIGNS

The number of research designs available in field approaches to investigating literacy is large and growing. In Table 5.1 we outline six broadly-construed research designs commonly found in published reports of field research studies. It includes a listing of key characteristics of each design, supplies sample research questions for each, and provides a few examples of published studies that have made use of each design.

TABLE 5.1

## Common research designs in field approaches to literacy research

Research design	Characteristics	Sample research question	Examples in the area of literacy
<b>Ethnography</b> classic interpretive critical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identifies and systemically describes patterns of beliefs, practices, and social interaction that comprise the <i>culture</i> of the group being studied</li> <li>Requires long time immersion in the everyday lives of the social group or community being studied</li> <li>Data includes: observations, interviews, surveys, artifact collection, historical and contemporary texts, participant journals, researcher journals, etc</li> <li>Data analysis includes: taxonomic analysis, domain analysis, physical trace analysis, and often includes discourse analysis when working with transcript data</li> <li>Often has a comparative dimension, especially in education.</li> <li>Can be combined with case study, document analysis, sociolinguistic elicitation, etc</li> </ul>	<p>What is the 'writing culture' in this school?</p> <p>What out-of-school literacies belonging to students are valued in this school?</p> <p>In what ways does a 'new' culture emerge with the school-wide introduction of the x literacy program?</p>	<p>Heath (1983) <i>Ways with Words</i></p> <p>Levinson, Foley, &amp; Holland, (1996) (eds) <i>The Cultural Production of the Educated Person: Critical Ethnographies of Schooling and Local Practice</i></p> <p>Green &amp; Wallat (1981)(eds) <i>Ethnography and Language in Educational Settings</i></p>
<b>Action research</b> technical practical emancipatory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The actual design involves a spiral of interlocking cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting</li> <li>Data includes: observations, interviews, participant-written cases and accounts</li> <li>Data analysis includes: pattern matching and comparison, coding, discourse analysis</li> <li>Generally aims at improving social practices and at involving everyone connected to the project, especially participants, in every phase of each cycle</li> </ul>	<p>What is 'reading buddies' all about? How can my students and I make our reading buddy sessions more effective?</p> <p>In what ways can my Year 4 students help the elderly in our community feel more safe in their own homes?</p>	<p>Atweh, Kemmis and Weeks (1998) (eds) <i>Action Research in Practice.</i></p> <p>Ziolkowski (1999) <i>A Teacher Action Research Study on Reading Buddies</i></p>
<b>Case studies</b> single multiple	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single entity, phenomenon or social unit</li> <li>Generates knowledge of the particular</li> <li>Useful for answering 'how?' or 'why?' questions</li> <li>Data includes: observations, interviews, surveys, artifact collection, historical and contemporary texts, participant journals, researcher journals, etc</li> <li>Data can be analysed using ethnographic and discourse analysis techniques</li> <li>Can be combined with ethnography, survey designs, linguistic elicitation, document analysis etc</li> </ul>	<p>What are the similarities and differences between the literacy approaches in three Year 6 classes at school X?</p> <p>What language and social purposes and practices are enacted in the everyday lives of four adolescents living in Brisbane?</p>	<p>Adams (1998) <i>A star means good?</i></p> <p>Knobel (1999) <i>Everyday Literacies</i></p> <p>Tanock (1997) <i>Catie: A case study of one first grader's reading status</i></p> <p>Walton (1993) <i>Aboriginal education in northern Australia: A case study of literacy policies and practices</i></p>



<b>Qualitative survey</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Used to collect <i>descriptive</i> data (rather than <i>numerical</i> data) about an issue, concept, practice, or event</li> <li>• Data comprises oral and/or written responses to a set of questions</li> <li>• Data collection tools include a questionnaire schedule comprising open-ended questions (ie no set answers to select from)</li> <li>• Data is generally analysed using content analysis techniques</li> <li>• Can be an element of action research, case study</li> </ul>	<p>What understandings do 12 classes of Year 6 students have of the purposes of the texts they write at school?</p> <p>What is the range of ‘popular’ texts read by my Year 3 students?</p>	<p>Knobel &amp; Lankshear (1995) <i>Learning Genres: Prospects for Empowerment</i></p> <p>Shepherd, L. (1998) <i>Building on cultural capital: Linking home and school literacies with popular texts.</i></p>
<b>Narrative Inquiry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Process of gathering and analysing people’s narratives in order to understand the nature of being, cultural values and beliefs, gather insights into the role of literacy in a person’s life, to develop theories of human existence, or, more prosaically, to investigate a time span, an event or a process</li> <li>• Data includes: folk tales etc, life histories, long interviews, personal journalistic, diaries, autobiographies, family stories and so on</li> <li>• Data collection tools include: interviewing and audiorecording or videorecording</li> <li>• Data is analysed using processes such as: content analysis and coding, linguistic analysis, or semiotic analysis</li> </ul>	<p>What role has literacy played in the lives of twenty 70-year-old people in my region?</p> <p>What impact has learning English had on the lives of 10 migrant girls in this area?</p> <p>What are the cultural and linguistic similarities and differences between x folk tales from Mexico and x folk tales from Europe?</p>	<p>Gilbert (1992) <i>And they all lived happily ever after: Cultural storylines and the construction of gender.</i></p> <p>Heath (1982) <i>What no bedtime story means: Narrative skills at home and school</i></p> <p>Michaels (1981) <i>‘Sharing time’: Children’s narrative styles and differential access to literacy</i></p>
<b>Discourse analysis</b> Speech-acts through to critical discourse analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interdisciplinary (eg sociolinguistics, critical theory, anthropology)</li> <li>• The researcher is interested in identifying and understanding the ‘action’ or ‘work’ that various kinds of ‘talk’ brings about or does</li> <li>• Data generally comprises text (eg transcripts of talk, written text)</li> <li>• Data analysis generally relies on linguistic and conversational analysis tools and/or concepts from language philosophy</li> <li>• Teacher talk, classroom discourse is a chief focus in Australian research</li> </ul>	<p>In what ways is the concept and practice of ‘literacy’ constructed in a year 1 teacher’s talk?</p> <p>How does student and teacher talk in literacy lessons help construct the teacher’s authority?</p>	<p>Baker &amp; Freebody (1989) <i>Children’s First School Books.</i></p> <p>Freebody, Ludwig &amp; Gunn (1996) <i>Everyday Literacy Practices In and Out of Schools in Low Socio-Economic Urban Communities</i></p>

## Data collection and analysis

The designs in Table 5.1 include different sets of data collection tools and methods. Nevertheless, there is a common pool of methods and tools in field research that can help make selecting appropriate tools and methods easier for the teacher-researcher. Key tools and techniques characteristic of field approaches to literacy research are summarised below in Table 5.2

**Common data collection tools and techniques in field approaches to literacy research**

**TABLE 5.2**

Techniques	Tools	Kinds of data collected	Examples of research designs that utilise them
<b>Observation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasises collecting data in real life, everyday contexts</li> <li>Tools and methods include: fieldnotes and journalistic notes of events; audiorecording; videorecording; time and motion studies, priority observation, etc</li> <li>Fieldnotes are those notes written in the 'heat of the moment' during observations of events, interactions, etc</li> <li>Journalistic notes are those notes written after observations when it was not possible to make fieldnotes</li> </ul>	Detailed and often complex slabs of written descriptions and interpretations of an event, process, phenomenon, etc are constructed.	Case study, action research, ethnography.
<b>Interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis is on eliciting desired information from someone</li> <li>Interview schedules (ie lists of questions) range from closed or structured (eg verbal questionnaires), to semi-structured (where there is room to move away from preset questions), through to open-ended (more like conversations with a purpose with no pre-set questions); audiorecording; videorecording</li> </ul>	Structured interviews (often commercially produced) can be used to assess a trait or a person's articulation of ability; semi-structured and open-ended interviews can be data themselves, or can be used to collect a range of data (eg life histories, perspectives on issues, background to a development).	Case study, action research, ethnography, discourse analysis.
<b>Open-ended questionnaires/surveys</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis is on gathering a range of responses to set items from a range of people</li> <li>Method includes oral or written questions or statements to respond to</li> <li>Questions are open-ended (how, what, why questions with unlimited space for response)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Large sets of data can be generated by surveys. Useful for identifying trends or preferences across a large number of people.</li> <li>Data is usually collected in categories (eg personal data, literacy practices) and in field research words instead of numbers are used to summarise the data.</li> </ul>	Action research, case study.

TABLE 5.2

Techniques	Tools	Kinds of data collected	Examples of research designs that utilise them
<b>Journalistic</b> Participant and/or researcher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Participant journals are deliberate data collection: participants are asked to write them in order to collect their personal insights into and reflections on an event, practice, concept etc</li> <li>A researcher journal is kept by the teacher-researcher and is used to record hunches, feelings, assumption about people or processes and the like as part of the reflective and verification process of field approaches to studying literacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Data is often intensely personal and written from a particular perspective.</li> <li>Can provide important insights for the teacher-researcher by means of providing an alternative perspective on an event, process, program etc (participant journal) or by making explicit personal understandings and stances on an event, issue, person (researcher journal).</li> </ul>	Case study, action research, ethnography, narrative inquiry.
<b>Projective techniques</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An object or text (an eliciting device) is used to 'elicit' cultural or psychological/cognitive information from participants</li> <li>Eliciting devices can be anything from texts, to dreams, to photographs, to everyday objects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>According to Fetterman (1989: 66), projective techniques can collect information about a person's needs, wants, fears, world-view and so on.</li> <li>Asking community members to rank concepts or issues or people can also give insights into the culture of a community.</li> </ul>	Ethnography, case study, narrative inquiry.
<b>Artifact collection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasis on collecting pertinent 'traces' or 'products' used by research participants, or relevant to the problem area being studied</li> <li>Artifacts come in many different forms, including: texts, lists of objects, photographs, drawings, etc</li> </ul>	Helps construct contextualising data for a study; that is, helps fills in additional details (eg making note of the magazines on someone's coffee table can tell you something about that person's interests).	Case study, action research, ethnography, narrative inquiry.
<b>Think-alouds</b>	Process of having study participants 'talk' the researcher through a problem solving process, other mental activity, or a literacy task (eg completing a test, ordering pictures, reading different genres).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provides insights into a participant's thinking strategies and processes.</li> <li>Enables the research to collect a verbal report of an activity-in-process while observing that activity for subsequent comparative analysis.</li> </ul>	Case study, action research, ethnography.

### Data analysis

Although a wide range of data analysis procedures is available for field approaches to investigating literacy, the most common strategy is *coding*. Coding is the process of searching through the data by means of asking who, what, when, where, why, how, how much, what is going on here, and so on. This

also includes assigning each response a code (usually a word or very short phrase) that will assist with retrieving and classifying 'bits' of data to be used as evidence for interpretations. This code is then used to organise the data beneath category headings through a process of comparison and searches for possible relationships between pieces of data.

This process of 'breaking down' the data (Mertens 1998: 352) is based largely on the researcher's understandings of what was going on, but is also aligned with the findings of similar, previously published research. Each discrete idea, event, utterance, and so forth is organised into categories. For example:

Operational technological literacies demonstrated by the students	Operational technological literacies demonstrated by the teachers	Teachers' attitudes to technology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of the difference between a web page and a web site (FN5/5: 12)</li> <li>• Able to install a mouse (T6/5: 3)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to save a file to a removable disk (FN1/5: 4)</li> <li>• Able to create tables in a document (FN1/5: 4)</li> <li>• Able to format a text (FN3/5: 26)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'What's the point of learning how to make a web page if the student can't even spell?' (T14/5: 5)</li> <li>• 'I'd like to know how to do more things with the computer, but don't have time' (T16/5: 8)</li> </ul>

Each bullet point identifies a discrete piece of data. The headings in each column are 'organising category labels'. The 'codes' in parentheses after each bullet-pointed phrase under each heading are 'retrieval codes' and refer to the form of the data, that is, a transcript (T), fieldnotes (FN) or journalistic notes (JN) etc, the date the data was recorded and the page in these texts on which the event can be found. Category labels may grow out of the data or be pre-determined by identifying them *before* the data is collected.

Coding is the most accessible data analysis for the teacher-researcher. For more on coding procedures see chapters 5 through to 8 in Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research*; Spradley's *Participant Observations* and *Systematic Classroom Observations: A Guide for Researchers and Teachers*.

### Issues in field research

As with any research, there are a number of potential problems in using field research designs to investigate literacy. First and foremost, all field research

studies require a great deal of time to plan, implement and analyse collected data. Often, teacher-researchers are hard-pressed to find this additional time and need to make pragmatic decisions about time 'costs' involved in any research project before embarking upon it.

One of the problems associated with field research is the myth that it is 'easy' and that it simply involves doing a bit of observation and making a few fieldnotes. Oftentimes researchers collect their data and then set about looking for a design to 'fit'. This kind of retrospective designing is very difficult to do and rarely results in rigorous research. Indeed such a pathway contravenes the logic of research.

Field research studies need to be thoroughly and carefully planned *before* data collection begins. This includes planning data analysis techniques that match the data to be collected, otherwise the teacher-researcher risks not collecting sufficient data that will address her research questions, losing track of the purpose of the study, being unable to bring data collection to an end or to analyse the data effectively.

## **CASE STUDY**

The case study is a useful design for the teacher-researcher who may not have time or resources to commit to long-term or more complex research designs (eg action research, ethnography), but who nevertheless wants to generate detailed accounts of an event, program, process or person in order to enhance their own teaching and learning practices. Indeed, case study is particularly suited to understanding complex, contemporary phenomena that other methodologies (eg quantitative survey) cannot provide.

### **Defining case study**

Only relatively recently has case study been recognised as a distinct research methodology. Previously it was simply conceptualised as a method for collecting data or as a 'descriptive' aspect of a quantitative study. Case study is the intensive (in depth and detailed) study of a bounded, contemporary phenomenon such as a classroom, a school, a literacy inservice program, a literacy pedagogical approach, a social group, and so on. Key aspects of this definition are:

- ▼ *In-depth study*—case studies are intensive in terms of both time span and the detail of data required
- ▼ *Focus on one instance*—case studies focus on one instance of a larger class of things (eg a Year 4 classroom, a high-top rural school). Accordingly, the ‘limits’ or ‘boundaries’ of the case are clear or relatively easy to define. A class of students is a classic example, as is the implementation of a literacy-oriented program, such as ‘First Steps’ or ‘Flying Start’ in a school.
- ▼ *Real-life contexts*—case studies investigate phenomena as they happen, rather than setting up control groups, manipulating variables, and the like

### Purposes of case studies

Thomas Yin (1994) suggests that ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions about a contemporary event, process, or bounded issue are well-suited to case study. For example:

How effective is my current approach to teaching grammar?

Why does Colin disrupt the class during literacy lessons?

How can I better understand the literacy needs of my ESL students?

Why do my students write narratives that are not very descriptive or imaginative?

A chief purpose of case study is to better *understand* a phenomenon. Directly related to this is the *heuristic* purpose of case studies; that is, they should enable the reader to make comparisons with similar or relevant cases in their own fields of experience in order to transfer understanding and apply findings from this study to his or her own context or situation.

### Case study designs

Two discrete ‘types’ of case study design are available to teacher-researchers investigating literacy. *Single case designs* investigate a single bounded phenomenon (for example, a classroom program, literacy policy development in a school, an at-risk learner, etc). Single case designs are particularly attractive to teacher-researchers because they enable direct focus on the case, rather than dispersing this focus across a number of cases. In addition, they are more

manageable in terms of resources, time, and effort required by multiple case study designs.

*Multiple case designs* investigate more than a single case for comparative (including evaluation) or cumulative purposes. For example, one of the authors studied four very different Year 7 students intensively in order to compare their in-school and out-of-school literacy practices (Knobel 1999). Multiple case study designs are more complex and require much more time and analytic work than single case studies.

### Case study tools and techniques

Case study, unlike ethnography or narrative inquiry, does not have its own set of unique tools and techniques for collecting data. Instead, the teacher-researcher is able to pick and choose tools and methods from a wide range of field research methodologies.

- (a) *Participant observation* enables access to degrees of 'insider' understandings and practices. The researcher actually takes part to a greater or lesser extent in the observed context. Types of participant observation range from complete and anonymous immersion in a social group (which entails serious ethical issues), to peripheral observation, to full and recognised participation. Teacher-researchers conducting a case study in their own classroom will be full participant observers by default.
- (b) *Field notes and journalistic notes* are used to record observations, feelings and descriptions whenever possible. They are richly detailed accounts of what went on, and include verbatim transcripts of what was said, times when things were observed, and often include a column for recording personal hunches, on-the-spot interpretations and references to theory. *Journalistic notes* are recorded from memory and are made as close to the end of each observation period as possible. The reliability of these notes can be later checked against other types of data (eg audiorecorded lessons, collected student work).
- (c) *Interviews and discussions* are key data collection strategies in case study research. Interviews are valuable for accessing participants' opinions, beliefs, values, literacy practices and shared learning experiences. 'Semi-structured interview' is the name given to interviews where the teacher-researcher has prepared beforehand a list of questions she or he would like to ask, but does not restrict the interview to these questions

or even to the order in which they are written. Unstructured interviews are not driven by a prepared list of questions, but are based on the researcher's awareness of the aims of the study. Both semi-structured and unstructured approaches to interviews and discussions allow researchers to probe responses, develop themes that emerge in the course of the interview and that provide valuable and relevant information, rather than being tied to a lock-step schedule that may miss out on opportunities to enrich the data. Group discussions are useful for accessing general consensus or divergence on an issue or recount of an event. Of course, care must be taken that the discussion is not dominated by only one or two people.

## ACTIVITY

Imagine you have a class of 25 students and you want to find out what their caregivers know and understand about your literacy program. You decide to interview at least some of them.

1. Provide a scenario under which you might use a semi-structured interview approach (eg who these people are, how well you know them, how well they know you, how parents conceptualise 'literacy', etc).
2. Provide a scenario under which you might use an unstructured interview approach.
3. Produce a five item semi-structured interview. Then imagine two or three further questions that arise in the course of the interviews in addition to those you have. Try also to think of some probes you might use in the course of some of your questions.

- (d) *Artifact collection.* Artifacts are the material traces of people's everyday lives. As with other types of data, the role and/or significance of an artifact is always interpreted by the researcher. Artifacts such as student-produced texts, drawings, magazines that students read add useful contextual dimensions to other collected data.

## Data analysis

Data analysis techniques used in case study research are many and varied. A common technique is coding, as described on page 94. Other popular techniques, many of which have been developed within ethnography, include:



- ▼ taxonomic and domain analysis (eg Spradley 1980)
- ▼ event mapping (eg Green and Meyer 1991, Knobel 1999, Putney 1996)
- ▼ pattern matching or searching (Fetterman 1989, Yin 1994)
- ▼ time-series analysis (Yin 1994)
- ▼ reconstructive analysis (Carspecken 1996).

Using the lists of journals provided in the Bibliography, identify two articles that are based on case study designs.

1. To what extent do they match the account of case study that we have provided here?
2. Where do they differ, and are these differences important?
3. Compare and contrast their respective approaches to data collection and data analysis.

ACTIVITY

## ACTION RESEARCH

Action research has become a popular approach to investigating education in the past twenty years. However, its popularity has also meant that just about anything and everything has come to be labelled as 'action research' in education circles when very often it is something else entirely (eg evaluative case study, quasi-experimental research).

### Defining action research

Action research originally grew out of the need for a research approach that would address *real* social problems. The characteristics detailed below will help you to distinguish action research from other approaches.

- ▼ *Pragmatic in nature*—action research is a practical approach in that it aims to address real-world *problems* where they occur
- ▼ *Commitment to change*—more so than case studies, library research, or quasi-experimental investigations, action research is committed to

bringing about change for the better in a situation. As Martyn Denscombe puts it, '[a]ction research is wedded to the idea that change is good' (1998: 59). Because of this real commitment to change, action research projects usually are not large-scale.

- ▼ *Cyclical/Iterative*—action research is most clearly differentiated from other research methodologies by its cyclical or iterative qualities. That is, the action research project itself is conceived and enacted as a series of cycles comprising: planning ⇔ intervention and monitoring ⇔ reflection and evaluation ⇔ planning adjustments to the intervention etc. In this way, the 'research' element of action research feeds directly back into the action until all participants are satisfied with the outcomes.
- ▼ *Collaboration/Participation*—collaboration between the researcher and the researched is a key feature of action research due largely to its origins in social justice movements, its original emphasis on critiquing power relations, and its commitment to change for the better. These days, however, community or group involvement in action research varies from full and complete collaboration between the researcher and the community, through to group members' participation only on some decisions and in some reflections and evaluations.

### **Purposes of action research**

The purposes of action research have changed over time as this methodology has been embraced by educationalists. The three different action research 'camps' in education have emerged in the past four decades and are summarised in Table 5.3 on page 101.

### **Action research designs**

A teacher-researcher will begin by identifying the problem or issue and developing research questions to address, then follow a cyclical or iterative process of planning, acting/implementing (some sort of intervention), monitoring, reflecting and evaluating, and planning again until a satisfying outcome is reached. Of course, these phases of the design are not discrete, but blur into each other—planning is not kept separate from reflecting on and evaluating outcomes of the intervention, nor does the planning in each cycle stop once

TABLE 5.3

## Purposes of action research

Action research for social change	Action research for knowledge	Action research for professional development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thoroughly 'grassroots' and is generated by a community in collaboration with a researcher</li> <li>• aims at improving social life for as many people as possible</li> <li>• usually emancipatory in nature and includes critiques of power relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• encompasses groups and communities and aims at addressing their practical concerns</li> <li>• members of the group or community are directly involved in the research process and in <i>all</i> phases</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• focuses on the individual researcher and aims at improving professional practice</li> <li>• the research process is a cycle of action and reflection on personal performance</li> <li>• people directly involved in the study participate in key decisions</li> </ul>

the intervention has been implemented. The type of intervention designed for a given action research project will be related directly to the practical problem to be addressed and to the anticipated outcomes and can be tailored appropriately as shown in the example below.

## EXAMPLE

A teacher may notice that many of the narratives written by her Year 5 boys describe extraordinarily violent events and actions. This in turn has upset a number of girls (and their parents) in the class who appeared as victims in the various stories. The teacher decides to turn the problem into an action research project in order to monitor the effects of a teaching strategy she plans to develop with the class. She presents the problem to her students during a whole class session, carefully explaining to the boys that the violence in their stories is problematic for many people.

As a group, they brainstorm ideas for what do about the problem—students variously suggest that it is okay to write such stories, provided that class members do not appear in them; others suggest that for every violent story the writer

should write a non-violent one. Others want violent stories banned, while some say they should be promoted because it might help them get jobs in the television or film industry. Together, they finally decide that violent stories can be written, but no class members are to appear in them and the violence is to be justified as an important part of the plot.

Accordingly, the intervention planned by the teacher includes intense class sessions on understanding how to establish and develop a storyline, on grammar, focusing on imaginative expression, and on 'original' topics, with the aim of extending students' narratives beyond rehashed accounts of movies they have seen. In addition to the guidelines for narrative content the class has set, she will monitor the effects of her intervention by recording detailed notes on the topics each student writes about and how often and on the content of his or her narratives. She will modify her intervention according to the outcomes of her observations, class evaluations and reflections on their collective stories etc, and will be especially alert to any changes for the better in her students' narratives—especially those of the boys who seemed fixated on extreme violence in their expressive writing.

### **Action research tools and techniques**

Action research is similar to case study in that its key data collection tools and techniques include interviews, observations, field notes and journalistic notes, audiotaping and transcripts, and so on. These are described in detail on page 92. In addition, action research sometimes makes use of quantitative methods such as numerically-based surveys and the like (see page 76). Action research can also make use of document collection tools and methods as it develops an intervention or as the group works towards better understanding the problem that faces them (see chapter 4).

The teacher-researcher using action research to address a literacy-related problem in his or her classroom will most probably include regular assessment procedures while monitoring the effects of the intervention she or he has implemented in her classroom. These include, among other things: anecdotal records about the students' literacy practices and attitudes; teacher-generated tests; analyses of writing and commercial and teacher-generated checklists for literacy competencies.

## Data analysis

In addition to analysing assessment items and the like, teacher-researchers doing action research in their classrooms will also be interested in the process of *pattern-matching*. This is a process for looking for patterns within the data collected. These patterns will indicate whether changes have occurred and may also indicate what kinds of changes have taken place. Taking our example of the Year 5 class above again, it was a pattern of violent narratives that generated the action research intervention in the first place. Subsequently, the teacher will look for this pattern being replaced by others (eg narratives where violence is justified, much less violence in all students' narratives). She will also keep an eye out for patterns that suggest unwanted changes are occurring (eg many of the girls begin writing graphically violent narratives, the boys stop writing any narratives at all).

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Locate two reports of action research projects. Compare and contrast the accounts they provide of their research design, and approaches to data collection and analysis. How well do these relate to the original research questions and purposes?